‘WHICH OF THE GODS IS THIS’? DIONYSUS IN THE HOMERIC HYMNS

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Of all the gods in the Greek Pantheon, Dionysus stands apart as one of the most challenging divine figures in Greek mythology. Dionysus is celebrated as the god of wine, the bringer of revelry and ecstatic release. However, we must not forget that Dionysus is also a shape shifter with a remarkably ambiguous identity. The fact of Dionysus’ divinity is often questioned in classical literature; perhaps this is due to the rivalling birth myths which stress Dionysus’ association with mortals. The *Homeric Hymns* to Dionysus (1, 7 and 26) provide some of the earliest literary representations of the god. The hymns are generally dated between the latter half of the seventh century BCE to the fifth century BCE; they are thought to have been composed by different poets and performed at different locations across the Greek world.[1] The surviving corpus of hymns are all dedicated to specific divinities; they recount birth myths and other major narratives that demonstrate a particular god’s/goddess’s divine powers or ‘spheres of influence’.[2] The aim of this essay is to explore the ways in which the hymns confirm Dionysus’ identity as an Olympian god. The hymn poets attempt to eliminate any uncertainty about Dionysus by considering his divine upbringing (1, 26), the events leading to his induction into Olympus (1) and the miraculous acts that he has performed among mortals (7). Although the three hymns place a different emphasis on Dionysus’ relation to Semele, all of the poems acknowledge Zeus as the divine father of the god. The emphasis on Dionysus’ immortal connections provides the god with a legitimate mythical history.

Before analysing the representation of Dionysus in the *Homeric Hymns,* we must first consider the myths that explain Dionysus’ origin. Dionysus is traditionally identified as the son of Zeus and Semele—the daughter of Cadmus, founder of Thebes.[3] In this tradition, Hera is angered by Zeus’s infidelity and retaliates against Semele. Hera convinces Semele to ask her lover to appear in his divine form. Semele unwittingly asks Zeus to grant her any wish; when Zeus agrees to this demand, Semele makes her fatal request. The exposure to Zeus’s divine form destroys Semele, but Zeus manages to save his unborn son from the mother’s ashes. Zeus sews the child into his thigh and the infant Dionysus is reborn from his father’s body.[4] In an alternative mythology, Dionysus is identified as the son of Zeus and Persephone.[5] Hera is also jealous of this union and sends the Titans to harm the child. The Titans attack the infant god, dismember his body and finally devour his corpse.[6] But as Morford and Lenardon explain, ‘[t]he heart of the infant god was saved and brought to Zeus by Athena, and Dionysus was born again’.[7] Zeus destroys the Titans and humankind is born from their ashes.[8] Dionysus’ close as-

1 West (2003), 5-6.
2 Some exceptions occur within the corpus of poems: *Hymn* 15 is addressed to Heracles, *Hymns* 17 and 33 address the Dioscuri.
3 Morford and Lenardon (1995), 218.
4 Morford and Lenardon (1995), 218.
5 Morford and Lenardon (1995), 241.
6 Morford and Lenardon (1995), 241.
7 Morford and Lenardon (1995), 241.
8 Morford and Lenardon (1995), 241.

sociation with mortals is most uncommon. In one myth Dionysus' death and rebirth results in the creation of humanity, in the other, he is a god, raised from the ashes of a mortal woman.[9] No other Olympian god can claim a mortal heritage, and so, it is not surprising that Dionysus' divinity is often challenged in myth.[10] The *Homeric Hymns* attempt to settle any uncertainties about Dionysus by disclosing the truth about the god's remarkable history.

The first *Homeric Hymn* acknowledges that Dionysus' origin is disputed and addresses this questionable topic by emphasising Dionysus' relation to Zeus. Martin West suggests that the first *Hymn to Dionysus* consists of four fragmentary poems which would have formed one longer hymn.[11] According to West, the hymn deals with Dionysus' induction into Olympus.[12] The first fragment begins by presenting a list of the places that have been identified as the original birthplace(s) of Dionysus:

> ...For some say it was Drakanos, some on windy
> Ikaros, some on Naxos, O scion of Zeus, Bull god, and
> some at Alpheios the deep swirling river {that Semele
> conceived and bore you to Zeus...}
> while others, Lord say that it was at Thebes you
> were born. All false!
>
> (*Hymn* 1, Frag. A.1-6).[13]

The poet is determined to quash these false claims by declaring that '[t]he father of gods and men gave you [Dionysus] birth far from humankind, to conceal you from white armed Hera' (6-8). Effectively, this statement diminishes all narratives that endow Dionysus with a mortal background. In this case, Dionysus is not named as the son of Semele and Zeus; rather he is the 'scion of Zeus', the all powerful 'father of gods and men' (2-7). Sarah Ruden's translation of the *Hymn to Dionysus* (1) makes this divine affiliation more apparent through the use of the epithets 'stitched-in god' (1) and 'seam-born Dionysus' (20).[14] Although the myth of Semele's death is implied in the reference to Dionysus' rebirth through Zeus, the divine father is the more prominent figure in *Hymn 1*.[15]

The poet of *Hymn 1* also distances Dionysus from the earthly sphere by announcing that his actual birthplace is 'far from humankind' on Mount Nysa (A.7). The mythical site of origin is

9 This sort of union often results in the birth of a demigod or hero; e.g. Heracles, Achilles etc. Despite their divine parentage, demigods are mortal beings.

10 See: Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Lykourgos in *Iliad* 6.128-40, the pirates in the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus* (7).

11 West (2003), 6.

12 West (2003), 6.

13 These line numbers are not exact; they refer to Martin West's English translation of the text. I have added the ellipses in line 4.

14 Ruden (2005), 1-2.

15 Martin West acknowledges that the final fragment of the poem (Section D, Codex M) provides two endings. One option reads as follows: 'So I salute you, Dionysus, Bull god, together with your mother Semele, whom they call Thyone.' Martin West ends his translation of the hymn with a closing prayer that is addressed solely to Dionysus. West's preferred ending also suggests that Semele is practically absent in this surviving version of the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus* (West [2003], 31).

described as the land of 'abundance'(A.13) and 'luxuriant' grape vines (B.1); indeed, Nysa is a far more fitting birthplace for Dionysus, the god of wine. However, Jenny Strauss Clay is convinced that the *Hymn to Dionysus* (1) has a 'Panhellenic Olympian orientation'.[16] For Clay, the hymn displays a 'self conscious avoidance of local legend' by 'overtly reject[ing]...five local claims to the birthplace of Dionysus before substituting the mythical Nysa'.[17] Why is it that the hymn poet locates Nysa 'in a distant part of Phoenicia, almost at the water's of the Nile' (A.9-10)? The geographical reference to Phoenicia implies that Dionysus is more foreign than Panhellenic.[18] Through this eastern association, we learn that Dionysus comes from an earthly-mythic place that is inaccessible to humans: 'no one crosses there by ship' and 'a steep cliff encloses it all around' (A.10-12). The choice to define Dionysus through a foreign, mythical birthplace weakens existing claims of a mortal Greek heritage.

The latter half of the first *Homeric Hymn* also legitimises Dionysus by explaining how he came to be accepted among the Olympian gods. The hymn reproduces the myth of Hephaestus' return to Olympus with a special focus on Dionysus' part in the narrative. Unfortunately this section of the hymn is the most fragmentary of all. However, Martin West's synopsis of the myth allows us to makes sense of the surviving text.[19] West suggests that the hymn refers back to Hera's rejection of Hephaestus. Hera casts her son out of Olympus and into the sea, because he is born a cripple. For years, Hephaestus remains among the Nereids, and uses his divine 'engineering skills' to devise a trap for his mother.[20] Hephaestus sends Hera a 'fine throne' which is designed to ensnare the goddess.[21] In the hymn, Zeus addresses Hera as he reflects upon this disastrous turn of events:

> ...he tricked you and put you in hellish fetters.
> Who could set you free my dear? A painful belt encircles
> your body, while he, heeding neither command
> nor entreaty, has formed an unshakable resolve in his
> heart.
>
> (*Hymn* 1, Frag. C.4-6)

Zeus intends to put an end to Hera's entrapment by calling on Ares' and Dionysus' assistance: 'Let us find out if he [Hephaestus] will/soften his heart of iron. For there are two clever sons/of mine at hand to help you with your suffering' (C.15-17). West concludes that Ares 'fails to achieve his object because Hephaestus defended himself with fire'.[22] However, Dionysus approaches the task differently and achieves success. The god of wine uses his divine gift to intoxicate Hephaestus and returns Hera's offending son to Olympus in a happier mood. Once

16 Clay (1989), 10.
17 Clay (1989), 10.
18 See Euripides *Bacchae* for more on the representation of Dionysus as a foreign, Eastern god.
19 West (2003), 6.
20 See *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (3), (tr. Crudden [2001]): 'The runt of all the gods is the son whom I bore myself,/ Hephaestos with shriveled feet. I flung him from my grasp/Into sea's expanse, but he was welcomed there/By Thetis whose feet are silver …' (316-19).
21 West (2003), 6.
22 West (2003), 7.

Hera is freed, she rewards Dionysus by allowing him to be honoured among the other Olympians.[23] The latter part of the hymn overshadows Dionysus' connection to Semele and the earthly realm by focusing on his involvement with the Olympians. By ending the dispute between Hephaestus and Hera, Dionysus brings peace to Olympus and proves himself as a worthy addition to the pantheon.

Hymn 1 further validates Dionysus' divine status by listing some of the ritual practices that humans perform in his honour. In fragment D of the hymn, the poet announces: '...And they will set up many effigies in his/shrines; and as there are three... , so at triennial festivals/people will ever sacrifice perfect hecatombs' (D.1-3). From what remains of the text, it is clear that Zeus ultimately sanctions Dionysus' presence in Olympus: 'So spoke the son of Kronos, and confirmed it with a nod/of his sable brows' (D.4-5).[24] This induction theme also appears in the longer hymns. Apollo proves his worth as a divinity by establishing his own shrines, slaying Typhaon and recruiting mortals to build and tend to his Delphic shrine.[25] The infant Hermes makes himself noticed by stealing Apollo's immortal cattle. Hermes also creates the lyre and uses the instrument as a bartering tool to gain divine privileges.[26] Just as Zeus authorises Dionysus' elevated status, in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (4), Zeus personally confirms Hermes' allotment of *timai* (569ff.). It is possible that more was said about Dionysus' divine powers; nonetheless, the brief reference to ritual honours is enough to substantiate Dionysus' place among the Olympian gods.

Unlike *Hymn* 1, *Hymn* 26 recognises Semele as the mother of Dionysus.[27] In the early lines of the hymn, Dionysus is named as 'Zeus' and glorious Semele's splendid son' (1-2). However, *Hymn* 26 reinforces Dionysus' immortal status by describing his divine upbringing among the nymphs of Nysa:

> ... the lovely-haired
> nymphs took [Dionysus] to their bosoms from his divine father
> and reared and fostered attentively in Nysa's glens; and he
> grew according to his father's design in the fragrant cave,
> numbered among the immortals.
>
> (*Hymn* 26, 2-6)

In this passage, there is no question about Dionysus' divinity; he has been raised among immortals, just as his 'divine father' had intended. Interestingly, Morford and Lenardon suggest that 'Ino, Semele's sister, is traditionally singled out as the one who cared for the god when he was

23 West (2003), 7.

24 In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* Zeus also grants Demeter additional honours and he 'guarantees' that Persephone will spend two thirds of the year in Olympus 'with the nod of his head' (460-66).

25 See the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (3).

26 See the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (4).

27 Martin West suggests that *Hymn* 26 was performed at a festival of an annual nature. West forms this idea based on the closing prayer: 'Dionysus of the abundant grape clusters: grant that we may come again in happiness at the due time, and time after time for many a year' (11-13). However, the prayer might refer to the cult of Dionysus, which offers initiates the promise of a good afterlife. Perhaps it also reflects on the god's resurrection from death or the seasonal cycle of death and rebirth. (West [2003], 19).

a baby'.[28] The very idea of a god being raised by a mortal relative is strange and challenging. Dionysus' traditional connection to mortals obscures the boundary between gods and human beings. Perhaps the hymn poet made a conscious decision to steer clear of this traditional mythology; that is assuming he had knowledge of its existence. *Hymn* 26 does not completely erase Dionysus' human parent, but the choice to locate the god in an immortal sphere raises fewer questions about his divine identity.

Hymn 26 further consolidates Dionysus' divinity by depicting him with immortal devotees. The nymphs of the hymn engage in a peaceful sort of revelry: 'the nymphs/would follow along as he led, and the noise of the revel/pervaded the boundless woodland' (8-10).[29] On the other hand, Dionysus' mortal worshippers have a reputation for violence and madness. In Euripides' tragedy, the *Bacchae*, the women of Thebes call upon the god before committing incredible acts of violence.[30] The messenger of the play reveals that the possessed worshippers 'attacked the cattle that were grazing in the grass' with their bare hands' (733ff.). Towards the end of the *Bacchae*, the ruler of Thebes (Pentheus) is dismembered by his mother and a wild 'horde of Bacchants' (1108ff.). The *Homeric Hymn* lessens Dionysus' ties to mortals by surrounding him with immortals in an idyllic mythical setting. Although it is accepted that Dionysus is the son of Semele; the god's divine upbringing dominates *Hymn* 26. Dionysus' life among the nymphs suggests that he is undoubtedly immortal; in fact, he is even celebrated by these divine beings.

Of the three surviving *Homeric Hymns to Dionysus*, *Hymn* 7 most explicitly reflects on Dionysus' ties to mortals. In the opening line of the hymn, Dionysus is identified as 'glorious Semele's son' (1). Strangely, the poet fails to mention Zeus or Dionysus' birth from his divine father. The absence of Zeus raises the possibility that Dionysus was born from Semele in a Greek city. Rather than elaborating on Dionysus' divine heritage, the hymn immediately presents the god in a mortal form. Dionysus appears on the sea shore in the 'likeness of a youth', with 'fine sable locks' and a 'cloak of crimson' (3-5). In various ways, the mortal guise evokes Dionysus *timai*. Dionysus' 'sable locks' remind the audience of sable furs and the god's connection with wild beasts. The contrast of the beautiful youth against 'barren sea' also highlights Dionysus' association with nature, fertility and growth. Yet, in the early part of *Hymn* 7, Dionysus seems to be more human than divine; he is the son of a mortal woman, he appears as a mortal youth and he dwells in the earthly sphere.

In *Hymn* 7, Dionysus is abducted by pirates, but this potentially humiliating incident actually allows the god to reveal his divinity to mortals. John Garcia believes that *Hymn* 7 explores the recurring theme of recognition, that is, when a mortal recognises a divinity before an epiphany occurs.[31] Although Dionysus appears in a human form, he still maintains a god-like appearance. In fact, the pirates seize Dionysus because they believe that he is descended from a demigod: 'they reckoned he was from a princely line fostered by/Zeus' (10-11). As Garcia observes,

28 Morford and Lenardon (1995), 219.

29 According to Morford and Lenardon (1995), 238, in mythology the maenads are often portrayed as nymphs rather than mortals.

30 The noise of the revelry is also featured in Euripides *Bacchae* (tr. Davie [2005]): '...the women began to wave their wands for the Bacchic rites, all calling together with one voice on Bromius...The whole mountain and its wild creatures were possessed by the god, and their motion made all things move' (722-26).

31 Garcia (2002), 16.

'[t]he helmsman sees through the god's disguise only after he has performed a minor miracle'.[32] When the helmsman notices that 'bonds would not contain' Dionysus,[33] he realises that the young captive 'is not like mortal men, but the gods who dwell on Olympus' (13-21). The helmsman attempts to guess the identity of the god and names three male Olympian divinities: Zeus, Apollo and Poseidon (19-20). Dionysus does not even enter into the helmsman's mind. Is this because Dionysus is a relatively obscure god? Is the Dionysus of *Hymn* 7 even accepted among the Olympians, or has he spent his life among mortals? Either way, the helmsman does not think of Dionysus as one of the major Olympian gods. Despite the helmsman's warning, the captain refuses to free his prisoner. Garcia rightly observes that 'the captain's greed for ransom money blinds him to Dionysus' divinity'.[34] However, the captain underlines the very point of the hymn when he declares that his prisoner will 'point us in the end to his connections and tell us what he's worth' (Ruden's trans. 30f.). It is through the narrative of revelation that the hymn poet justifies Dionysus' claim to divine status.

In the remainder of *Hymn* 7, Dionysus gradually exposes his immortal identity through a series of 'miraculous apparitions', all of which display areas of his *timai*. The sailors are 'seized with astonishment' (37) when wine begins to '[gush] out over the dark swift ship' and a divine, 'ambrosial' smell fills the air (35-37). The god's power over vegetation is demonstrated when a grape vine ('hung with many grape clusters') begins to grow across the top of the sail (38-40). The mast is entwined with ivy 'all flowering, [with] pretty berries' and the tholes of the ship are instantly 'decorated with garlands' (38-42). Dionysus also proves that he is able to control wild beasts. The god 'signal[s] his power' when he transforms into a lion; he also makes a bear appear on the ship. The pirates gather around the helmsman, terrified, as the lion-formed Dionysus 'seize[s] the captain of the ship' (50f.). When the remaining men jump into the sea, Dionysus transforms them into dolphins; this act also reiterates the god's ability to initiate physical metamorphoses. The final phase of Dionysus' revelation takes place as the god addresses the helmsman. Dionysus bestows his 'highest blessing' on the mortal by disclosing his true identity: 'Be not afraid good mariner...I am/Dionysus the mighty roarer, born to Cadmus' daughter/Semele in union of love with Zeus' (my ellipsis, 55-57). Thus, Dionysus reveals his relation to Zeus, but he also elevates Semele in the process. Although Dionysus announces that he was born from a mortal woman; this information does not lessen his divine status. Dionysus proves that he is a god by publicly exercising his divine powers in front of a group of mortal witnesses. *Hymn* 7 confirms that Dionysus is certainly a force to be reckoned with.

Overall, *Hymns* 1, 7 and 26 present varying and at times contradictory images of Dionysus. The god is either named as the son of Zeus, or Semele, or both. In spite of these discrepancies, the three hymns all achieve the same end; they all celebrate Dionysus the divine being. Because Dionysus is the result of a mortal-immortal coupling, his divine identity is somewhat doubtful. Like the captain in *Hymn* 7, we are moved to wonder—who is Dionysus, where did he come from, and what is his worth? The hymns attempt to answer these questions by referring to

32 Garcia (2002), 16.

33 This recalls the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* when Apollo fails to restrain the infant god: '[Apollo] began to plait strong bonds from osier. But the osiers at once grew into the earth right there beneath his feet, twined into each other like grafts...by the designs of deceptive Hermes' (409 ff., tr. West [2003]).

34 Garcia (2002), 17.

myths that explore Dionysus' divine identity. In the early part of *Hymn* 1, Dionysus is undoubtedly thought of as an immortal because he is the born from Zeus, in a distant and inaccessible location. The latter part of *Hymn* 1 also demonstrates that Dionysus interacts with the Olympian divinities, not humans. We learn that Dionysus is honoured among the Olympian gods because he alone could solve the dispute between Hera and Hephaestus. Likewise, *Hymn* 26 reveals that Dionysus has been close to divine beings since his infancy. Interestingly, the hymn casts the nymphs of Nysa as Dionysus' divine followers, while other mythic traditions align the god with his mortal maenads. However, *Hymn* 7 complicates the trends established in aforementioned hymns. In *Hymn* 7, Dionysus is emphatically associated with mortals: he is identified through Semele, appears in a human form, is mistaken as the descendant of demigod, and he is even abducted by mortals. Of course, we see that the god only fraternises with the pirates in order to unveil his divinity. By the end of the hymn, Dionysus reveals that he born from Semele 'in union with Zeus'. The miracles described in *Hymn* 7 show that Dionysus is all god. By supplying Dionysus with a sound history, the three hymns collectively displace any lingering uncertainties about the god. In the end, Dionysus' mortal parentage does not detract from his divinity because the hymns adequately affirm his immortal heritage.

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